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Donor Sibling Registry helps kids of LGBT parents grappling with their origins

BY ETHAN JACOBS | AUGUST 27, 2008



UPDATED 5 p.m. 8/28/08 with correction (see end of story)

LGBT parents have long preached the mantra that love makes a family, but some are finding that as their children age they must also grapple with the question of biology. That point was driven home for Connie Turner and Jane McKay, a couple with two sons conceived with an anonymous sperm donor, about seven years ago when the couple's oldest son, Christopher, told Turner

about a comment made by one of his preschool classmates.

"We were heading home one day from preschool and [he said] one of his classmates said, in a four-year-old sort of way, Christopher, there's no way you could have been born if you didn't have a dad," said Turner. She promptly gave her son, who is now 11, an impromptu biology lesson and explained how he was conceived. That exchange, said Turner, made her and McKay aware that at some point their sons would have more questions about their biological origins.

The couple's second son, Matthew, who is 8, was conceived using the same sperm donor that was used to conceive Christopher.

About four years ago, Turner and McKay, who are married and live in New Salem, Mass., found a resource to begin answering those questions when they read a news article about the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR), a non-profit that helps children and their parents find other children conceived using the same sperm donor. Users log on to the DSR website and enter the unique donor identification number for their donor and information about what clinic they used, and they can see if other members of the registry used the same donor. About a year after Turner and McKay signed on they got their first contact from a lesbian mother of twin teenage boys who were Christopher and Matthew's genetic half-siblings. Turner said they exchanged e-mails and photos between the family, but she and McKay were hesitant to establish a close relationship with the other family because the half-siblings' parents had recently split up, and only one of the parents seemed interested in connecting with them through DSR. Turner and McKay did not want to have their sons get their hopes up if the California family decided to suddenly cease contact.

They had better luck a year later when another mom from California contacted them. Her own son, Nick, who is nine years old, was also conceived using their donor. Nick's mother was eager for him to connect with half-siblings because he is an only child. Turner said the families have not yet met in person, but Turner's sons have had several long phone conversations with Nick, and they have become fast phone buddies. At some point in the future Turner said her family would like to travel west to meet Nick and his family in person.

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As to what their sons make of their ties to these boys on the left coast, Turner said they seem to see them much more as friends than as family members. She said they still understand family as being based more around love than biology. But they also recognize that they have a different kind of tie to these boys than they do to their other friends.

"The added bonus is these newfound friends out in California are related, but it's just exciting to have more friends and playmates. ... It's definitely agreed that Nick looks like my older son, the kids have decided that," said Turner. "They see the similarities and comment on it. It's just kind of interesting to them."

She said she and McKay have decided to follow their sons' lead as far as talking about what it means to have been conceived using donor sperm and to know that there are other half-siblings out there (Turner said after Matthew was conceived they were told that there had been 43 successful pregnancies using the donor). She said Christopher, who is the more reserved of the two siblings, will occasionally ask questions about how he was conceived, but he will give clear signals when he has had enough information for one sitting. Matthew, by contrast, is very open and interested in talking about the biological similarities he may share with his donor.

"He said, 'My toes look like my Y-guy.' He calls [the donor] his Y-guy," said Turner.

The Turner/McKay family is not the only lesbian-headed family using the DSR to find their children's biological half-siblings. Wendy Kramer, founder of the DSR, said that of the more than 22,000 members, about a third are from families with two moms; another third are families with heterosexual married parents, and the final third, like Kramer herself, are single moms and their children.

Kramer said she and her son Ryan, now a college student, originally started the registry back in 2000 as an informal Yahoo message board. She said Ryan had always been curious about whether he had any half-siblings, and the two decided to go online and create a venue to find them. In two years they had a few dozen people on the Yahoo group, but with some media attention that dozen expanded exponentially. In 2003 they left Yahoo and created their own freestanding DSR site, which charges a \$50 membership fee to post information and search on the site. Thus far the site has produced 5670 matches. Beyond finding siblings, visitors to the site can also find the identity of their donor if the donor decides to join the site and post his identity.

Kramer said some of the connections formed over DSR have been less than successful; the ones that go awry often reveal the insecurities many people feel discussing donor-assisted reproduction. She and Ryan went through two negative experiences with families through the DSR before finding a family eager to connect with them. The first contact they received was from a woman from Boston who had seen Ryan on television when he was 16 talking about the DSR. Kramer said the woman contacted them because she was sure she and her husband had used the same donor to conceive their two daughters, and once they connected they confirmed it. But the woman explained that the daughters did not know they were conceived with a donor, and she and her husband had no intention of telling them.

The second contact Kramer and her son received was from a 15-year-old girl who had signed up for the site and discovered she was Ryan's half-sibling. When the girl's mother found out that her daughter had been on the site, she forbid her daughter from having any contact with the Kramers.

Last year Kramer said they finally had a good match, connecting with a 13-year-old half-sibling whose parents were enthusiastic about their daughter finding genetic relatives. The Kramers met the girl and her family last February.

Kramer said the DSR stresses that parents should be as honest as possible with their children about how they were conceived. She said some parents, particularly non-biological parents, believe that the sperm used to conceive their children is a relatively unimportant piece of biological material.

"To your child it may have more meaning. It may be one half of their genetic ancestral DNA background. ... Maybe they won't see it as significant, but maybe [they] will," said Kramer. "Don't minimize it and don't make them feel guilty for being curious. For the non-biological parent, it doesn't make you any less of a parent that your kid is curious or wants to search."

Turner said she and McKay had no concerns that contact with their biological kin would weaken the bonds of their family. But she said when she and McKay first talked about conceiving over a decade ago they gave little thought to whether their children would have questions about their genetic origins. Their main concern was making sure that when they became parents both of them had rock solid legal claims as the parents of their children and that the sperm donor had no standing to sue for parental rights. In the years since their children were born the laws and court precedents protecting LGBT parents have strengthened, and that issue has moved to the backburner.

Now Turner and McKay are trying to anticipate what questions their sons will ask as they



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enter their teen years and move forward into adulthood. Turner said they are beginning the process of trying to find the identity of their sperm donor so that they have it ready when their sons begin asking about him.

"Our next journey is to get a little ahead of them and maybe find the donor, get that contact information ready for the day they want it and hand it to them. ... I'm anticipating that need because that's a need people face, especially when they want to have a family, if not before," said Turner.

Correction: In the original version of this story Bay Windows incorrectly stated that Matthew, Turner and McKay's youngest son, referred to his genetic half-sibling as his "Y-guy." In fact Matthew was referring to the donor his parents used to conceive. That change is now reflected in the story.

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